

configurations of work and value 'on the margins' (though really at the core), one that centres the perspectives of Congolese mining laborers to reveal how they use their hands to dig and to build, *together*, amidst exploitation and ruination.

Brian Ikaika Klein

University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA

Email: briklein@umich.edu

doi: [10.1017/S0001972024000378](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000378)

The thing about minerals is that they are either there or they are not. So what happens when they are there? The common answer with respect to Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is 'conflict'. The idea that minerals cause conflict in the region has become commonplace and has motivated extensive monitoring schemes and legislation ostensibly designed to prevent this conflict. In some ways this seems a laudable aim. People should not be slaughtered, crushed, maimed or poisoned to produce the devices now necessary for everyday life.

The key question, however, is one of causality. James Smith's book, based on several years of challenging and physically demanding fieldwork, turns the popular understanding of the connection between minerals and violence on its head. There is a connection, but it's the other way around: war created a mining economy. Conflict in the region displaced huge numbers of people, making them available for mining while rendering other economic activities less possible. People dispossessed by war entered artisanal mining, which boomed as the war subsided. This was also a time when new digital technologies created a demand for metals known as the '3Ts' – tantalum, tin and tungsten. The perception that demand by Western consumers for laptops and smartphones caused conflict, that 'new technologies were *converted into violence in Congo*' (p. 55), was a powerful and disturbing one. The perception that artisanal miners were either victims or perpetrators of violence was also reinforced by NGOs, visiting journalists and the international mining companies that intended to displace them.

At the centre of the book are the lives and concepts of diggers and dealers in minerals. Miners' lives are characterized by movement, mobility and the continual creation of new relationships with other miners, traders and *négociants* (middlepersons). They often understand their work in relation to the history of industrial mining in the region, even if their day-to-day activities are quite different. This is partly because there is a pervasive uncertainty around artisanal mining that pushes many into debt, as the uncertainty of generating an income from mining is coupled with the certainty of expenditure on food and the materials needed to mine.

These rich descriptions are one of the great strengths of the book. Miners are usually seen by both outsiders and urban Congolese as either victims or criminals who perform degrading work. In fact, they have pride in their work and insist that they are the ones who produce wealth, implying that those who diminish and criticize them ultimately depend on them.

That said, while Smith begins by saying the book focuses on the 'work' of miners (p. 3), there is more about how minerals are sold and how extraction is financed than on the actual work that miners do to extract minerals from the earth. Some of the tasks around

selling and negotiating are also 'work', but the first stage of extraction remains obscure. One exception is a section in Chapter 4 about how *plongeurs* (divers) use scuba gear and sandbags tied around their waists to extract diamonds from river bottoms.

More is said about what miners think about their work, their cosmologies and their beliefs in the role of ancestors in extraction. The book also provides perspectives into what diggers and *négociants* think about tracking schemes for 'conflict minerals'. Mostly, they are incredulous and angry that restrictions were imposed only years after the war ended. 'Conflict-free' minerals are desired, diggers think, because the presence of Congolese blood makes digital devices 'impure' for whites. Many believe that they are being constantly surveilled under these schemes by satellites or cameras. One man even insisted that Smith had cameras in the soles of his shoes. These are 'the eyes of the world', a phrase repeated to Smith around artisanal mines.

Smith himself is heavily critical of the tagging system and in Chapter 9 provides a detailed explanation of what it actually entails, pointing to at least one instance where the system triggered conflict. One of the main issues is that only a small minority of sites are certified. Those outside the system – which is the vast majority of miners – can have their minerals confiscated, though in practice state officials routinely distribute tags outside the system to render minerals 'clean'.

The emphasis on 'clean' minerals benefits the international mining companies, which have taken control of some artisanal mining sites and expelled the miners. This process involved direct and violent conflict with artisanal miners, which was then used as justification for the tracking schemes. Smith terms this conflict 'historically transformative, ushering in a new moment in the history of mining' in the region, or possibly the whole world (p. 197). I am unconvinced. Conflicts between independent diggers and mining companies over deposits have been a regular feature of the industry over at least the last two centuries.

There was one disappointing aspect of the book: namely, the relative lack of engagement with work by Congolese scholars (or scholarship in French – all the cited works are in English). There are several missed opportunities where Smith could have drawn on such scholarship. In Chapter 4, for instance, Smith explains that former employees of Sakima, a state-owned mining company, viewed the company as a paternalistic father figure who had abandoned his children. This understanding has clear parallels with the work of Donatien Dibwe Dia Mwembu, whose book *Bana shaba abandonnés par leur père* (Children of copper abandoned by their father) focuses on workers at another state-owned mining company, Gécamines.¹ What may seem like a particular regional history is, in fact, part of a wider phenomenon.

Duncan Money
Freelance historian, Kampala, Uganda
Email: duncanmoneyhistory@proton.me
doi: [10.1017/S000197202400038X](https://doi.org/10.1017/S000197202400038X)

¹ D. Dibwe Dia Mwembu (2001) *Bana shaba abandonnés par leur père: structures de l'autorité et histoire sociale de la famille ouvrière au Katanga 1910-1997*. Paris: L'Harmattan.